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ABSTRACT

This paper reports on a survey of public and Catholic elementary schools in southwest Pennsylvania. The purpose of the study was to find out the extent to which various educational practices, association with those two types of schools, have been adopted in the schools and whether Catholic and public schools differ along a continuum of traditional/progressive educational practices. A survey instrument was constructed by identifying 10 current educational practices and then by enlisting a scholarly panel to refine the list. The resulting survey contained 10 educational practices having to do with instruction, reading, math, social studies, curriculum, outcomes, assessment, grades, standards, and the teacher's role. Results were obtained from a sample of 115 schools (56 public, 59 Catholic). Findings indicate that, on most dimensions of schooling, Catholic and public elementary schools do not significantly differ. However, some differences were found in instructional techniques and in expected outcomes. Catholic schools tended to rely more on traditional methods and direct instruction by the teacher, rather than on the type of self-directed student learning more widespread in public schools. Furthermore, Catholic schools were somewhat more progressive than public schools in adopting a "whole child" approach to child development. (RJM)

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Two Models of Educational Practice: Their Prevalence in the Public and Catholic Schools of Southwestern Pennsylvania

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Two Models of Educational Practice:
Their Prevalence in the Public and Catholic
Schools of Southwestern Pennsylvania

Abstract

Two broad approaches to contemporary education have evolved in recent decades: the traditional, and the progressive. The purpose of this study was to survey Public and Catholic elementary schools in the Southwestern Pennsylvania region, with the aim of finding out: the extent to which various educational practices, associated with those two approaches, have reportedly been adopted in the schools; and, if the types of schools differ along a continuum of traditional/progressive educational practices. It was found that, on most dimensions of school practices, Catholic and Public elementary schools did not significantly differ. Although, in general, the two types of schools seemed more alike than different, some differences were found in *Instruction*, and in the *Outcomes* expected in terms of student development. A better understanding of the practices reported to be in place in today's schools will help inform the current debate on school reform, and focus the discussion of choice by providing a framework with clear alternatives. It is hoped that this study might contribute towards that end.

Two Models of Educational Practice:
Their Prevalence in the Public and Catholic
Schools of Southwestern Pennsylvania

American schools today are facing a crisis of confidence as they find themselves embroiled in a struggle between two competing "philosophies" of education. In the last several decades progressivist ideas have come to assume an increasingly dominant place in the landscape of American education. This approach has brought with it a number of practices which have generated controversy in their implementation, and weakened the consensus necessary for a society to maintain effective schools.

Modern progressive education, as practiced in today's schools, finds it philosophical roots in the ideas of Rosseau, Herbert Spencer, and most especially John Dewey. These ideas served to shape what came to be regarded as liberal education in the 19th and early 20th centuries. But while progressivist ideas gained some ground throughout the 20th century in America, their influence was largely circumscribed, that is, until the movement was given new life by a group of writers of the 1960s and 70s -- writers who advocated a radical transformation of America's schools. A generation of educational critics like Charles Silberman, Paul Goodman, Jonathan Kozol, John Holt, and A. S. Neill, argued for a "new education", one based on progressivist principles heavily imbued with ideas borrowed from humanistic psychology. The title of H. C. Lyon's 1971 book, "*Learning to Feel, Feeling to Learn*", reflected the emerging philosophy that was to become a major force in shaping American education during the 1970s and 80s.

As these progressivist ideas gained influence they became arrayed against a set of practices that had become associated with a more traditional approach to schooling in America. Cornel Hamm (1989), in a lucid treatment of educational concepts, points out that, fairly or unfairly, a cluster of notions have attached themselves to these two broad approaches. Traditional education has become associated with concepts such as: subject-centered, teaching, standards, examinations, structure, order, work discipline, memorization, mastery of subject content, order and accountability. Similar notions that have attached themselves to progressive education include: child-centered, emotions, activity, relevance, discovery, critical thinking, growth, and creativity.

Much of the controversy in and around today's schools, as well as the resulting calls for school reform, emerge from the clash of these two competing approaches or philosophies of education. It is hoped that this project will help to frame the issues and inform the debate as to the nature of schools and schooling in America.

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Two Models of Educational Practice

There is a burgeoning interest among educators, politicians, and the general public in finding alternative ways to provide schooling. This interest is manifested by a widening array of options such as: school choice, vouchers and charter schools, many of which are being put forth outside of mainstream schools. But the mainstream schools, both public and non-public, have also responded to the winds of change. In response to rapid social change, and the calls for school reform, they too, have explored and adopted various practices of schooling.

In some cases, educators consciously adopt practices derived from educational theories, or "philosophies " of education to help to shape their school's identity, to better articulate their mission, and to implement the educational theory they wish to embrace. Sometimes, these decisions are influenced by a defining ideology. Yet while it may be true that a broader ideology undoubtedly affects the choices that are made about education, it is equally likely that educational practices will be adopted by informal, eclectic, and trial-and-error means (Raywid, 1983). But no matter how they come to be adopted, models of educational practice are important as they influence the structures, organization, and management of schools -- key issues in matching the needs of children with the schools designed to meet those needs (Chandler, 1997; 1998).

Makedon (1992) has proposed a useful typology of school reform models. Recognizing the historical roots of school reform, he has set forth a typology of models based on the underlying ideology. Within the traditional mainstream, he proposes that models may be characterized as "conservative" or "liberal." Models outside of the traditional mainstream, such as experimental and alternate school arrangements, he terms as "radical" models.

Since the purpose of this study is to investigate models adopted within mainstream schools, the broad bipolar typology suggested by Makedon seems most useful. Unfortunately, Makedon's ideological labels hold political connotations, which often blur the issue as an educational one. It would appear to be equally valid, and in some ways more appropriate, to label the two models in educational terms as "traditional" and "progressive"; a bipolar typology that has been adopted for this study. Broadly speaking, educational practices in today's schools may be seen as clustering into two identifiable groups, depending on the approach they take to various dimensions of schooling such as: organization, management, curriculum, and instruction. The characteristics of each model are described below:

Traditional Schools: Traditionalists emphasize academic standards in schools that tend to be more authoritarian, following a curriculum that is content-based, and formed around the traditional core disciplines. Such schools tend to emphasize structure and discipline, with some traditional schools mandating school uniforms. They typically rely on grading, tracking, and grouping children by ability level for instruction by the teacher, and they tend to employ objective tests for evaluating student achievement.

Critics of Traditional approaches maintain that such schools impair children's development by imposing a rigid learning sequence, one which ignores the fact that children differ in the ways they learn. Moreover, they unfairly hold students to standards that are not consistent with their learning style. They see the focus on academics as being too narrow; emphasizing academic achievement, often to the detriment of other aspects of the developing child, like emotional adjustment. They also feel that traditional schools rely too much on direct instruction, and rote memorization. Finally, they feel that such schools with their teacher-oriented authoritarian instruction, tend to stifle children's natural sense of exploration and creativity.

Progressive Schools: Progressive educators believe in a child-centered approach, one that is more democratic, with the emphasis on group projects rather than individual performance for grades. They speak of a humanistic concern for the "whole child"--hence their concern with social and emotional development, and the emerging sense of self-esteem. They advocate experiential, "discovery" learning which is led by the child, as opposed to direct instruction led by the teacher; cooperative and collaborative activities, as opposed to the competition inherent in grades and tests; and a concern with using differences in individual learning style to determine both the process and content of learning. They are concerned with developing processes like higher order thinking, and critical thinking; less concerned with the transmission of factual knowledge.

Critics of Progressive approaches believe that such schools, by de-emphasizing academic work, and emphasizing process over content, weaken the academic foundation necessary for a lifetime of learning. They feel the emphasis on self-esteem and children's emotional development is misplaced, often resulting in rewarding style over substance. They see the child-oriented approach, with the teacher being relegated to a less central role, as detrimental to adult authority and discipline.

A comparison of traditional and progressive schools may be found in Table 1.

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Table 1. A Comparison of Two Educational Models

Traditional Schools Model	Progressive Schools Model
Instruction. Direct instruction by the teacher; with homogeneous grouping.	*Instruction.* Self-directed learning, discovery learning, working cooperatively with others; heterogeneous grouping.
Reading. Reliance on a phonics approach.	*Reading.* Reliance on a whole-word approach.
Mathematics. Reliance on direct instruction; drill, computation skills.	*Mathematics.* Reliance on discovery and student initiated learning.
Assessment. Reliance on periodic testing with norm-referenced, objective tests.	*Assessment.* Reliance on portfolios which feature individual and collaborative projects.
Grades are assigned by comparing performance with age/grade peers.	*Grades* are downplayed in favor of teacher comments on progress.
Social studies focus on the American heritage, and on cross-cultural studies.	*Social studies* focus is on diversity, mutlticulturalism; social concerns and social responsibilities.
Outcomes. Emphasizes academic skills as demonstrated in the traditional core areas.	*Outcomes.* Emphasizes the whole child approach; psychological, social, and cultural aspects of child development.
Curriculum: Narrow, focused on academic areas.	*Curriculum*: Encompasses a range of issues; a balance between academic and social concerns.
Standards are set so that all children seek the same level of minimal competency.	*Standards* are adjusted recognizing the differences among individual learners.
Teacher's role: academic instructor; authority figure.	*Teacher's role*: facilitator, counselor, and mentor.

From: Chandler, L.A., (1998) Two Models of Educational Practice.

The School Practices Project

School choice is based on the premise that schools may provide clear alternatives to what many see as the dominant educational pattern in American schools today. Still, the notion that there are significant differences among today's schools has not be established. Moreover, if there is a "dominant pattern" that defines mainstream American schools, that pattern is not clearly understood nor generally agreed upon, leaving alternatives sometimes more apparent than real: a source of confusion for educators, parents and the general public. Therefore, clearly defining the extant models of educational practice, and determining the prevalence of their implementation is important.

The purpose of this research project is to determine the extent to which the educational practices associated with two models of education have been adopted, in whole or in part, in today's schools. From the data will emerge a descriptive picture of the current practices. This "anatomy of the schools" will allow for comparisons to be made among various types of mainstream American schools to help determine whether the purported differences among various types of schools are significant, and if so, in what ways.

This phase of the project was concerned with surveying primary and elementary schools in the Southwestern Pennsylvania region. The intent was to survey both Public and Catholic schools, using the *Survey of School Practices,* with the aim of finding out: the extent to which various educational practices have reportedly been adopted in the schools; and if the types of schools differ on the continuum of traditional/progressive educational practices.

Method

Measure

A review of current educational literature from the ERIC database (1992-1998), and of selected topics from the *Education Week* database, served to identify current educational practices extant in today's schools. From these reviews, a list of ten practices were identified, and each was placed on a 5-point traditional/progressive continuum as determined by their context.

This list was subsequently refined by being submitted to a scholarly panel which included: a professor and educational historian, a teacher with over 20 years of experience in the schools; a teacher and administrator with over 30 years of educational experience; a professor of educational psychology and writer on educational matters; a professor of education and research methodology; and an educational policy maker with considerable experience at the state and national level. Panel members were in general agreement with the proposed characterization of educational practices, and their

comments were incorporated into the revised Table (Table 1) which was derived from that list.

Next, in order to gather data on the extent of the adoption of educational practices associated with the two models, a questionnaire was constructed based on the elements outlined in Table 1. The resulting *School Practices Survey* is composed of 10 educational practices having to do with: instruction, reading, math, social studies, curriculum, outcomes, assessment, grades, standards, and the teacher's role. These practices are arranged as questionnaire items on a bipolar dimensional scale (from traditional to progressive) that can be seen to represent the degree of adoption of each practice by a targeted school.

The *School Practices Survey* yields 10 Item Scores, and a Total Score, which may be seen as an estimate of the place of the school along the traditional-progressive continuum. The range of possible Total Scores extends from 10 (most traditional) to 50 (most progressive), with the midpoint at 30.

Respondents

For the Catholic Schools sample, a list of schools within the Roman Catholic Diocese of Pittsburgh was obtained. The list contained all schools associated with parishes in Southwestern Pennsylvania, including the Greater Pittsburgh area (Allegheny County), and five adjacent counties. For purposes of this survey, only primary and elementary schools were selected. The result was a survey sample of 97 Roman Catholic schools in the Southwestern Pennsylvania region.

In order to assure a similar geographic distribution for comparison purposes, a list of primary and elementary public schools in the same 6-county region was constructed. From that list of 325 Public schools, 100 were randomly selected to be assigned to the comparison group for this study.

Procedures

The procedure involved a mail survey with a letter being sent to each head of school, principal, or school director, asking that they complete a survey form designed to characterize their school in terms of 10 educational practices. A pilot study of the mail survey procedure, testing the feasibility of the survey questionnaire, yielded a return rate of 63%.

Following the same procedures as tested in the pilot study, 197 surveys were sent out; 113 were returned within a two-week period. Follow-up reminders yielded an additional 7, for a sample of 120 (61%). Of the 120, 5 were invalidated for various reasons, leaving a final sample of 115 schools (56 Public; 59 Catholic).

Results

In order to examine the extent of various educational practices adopted by the 115 elementary schools surveyed in this study, item responses on the *School Practices Survey* were placed on a scale of 1 to 5, with 3 as the midpoint. Means and Standard Deviations were then calculated for the 10 item scores, as well as the Total score (Table 2).

[Insert Table 2 about here]

An examination of Table 2 show that the schools, on the average, see themselves as having developed a balanced approach, one that favors neither extreme on the traditional/progressive continuum, but tends towards the middle, although the variance within each distribution on some of the practices is relatively large. A further examination of Table 2 finds no consistent trend across practices (i.e., the Means of one type of school being consistently higher or lower). In addition, both groups have almost identical Mean Total Scores, suggesting the groups are, in general, rather similar in the practices they reportedly have adopted.

As a measure of consistency of response, intercorrelation matrices were constructed for both groups to examine the relationships among practices within each type of school. The results showed that on average, there was considerable consistency between the groups across all 10 practices (Catholic Schools mean r= .33; Public Schools mean r= .34).

Next, in order to further discover if there were differences between the two types of schools, a analysis of variance for repeated measures was performed (Table 3).

[Insert Table 3 about here]

This analysis found there were significant differences among the practices between the two types of schools. A Tukey post-hoc analysis was then conducted for pair-wise differences between the means. A critical value of .35 was calculated, and two practices were found that exceeded that value: *Instruction and Outcomes*. More specifically, Catholic schools were found to rely more strongly on a more traditional style of direct instruction by the teacher, then their Public school counterparts; while they were somewhat more progressive in their perception of "whole child" outcomes.

Finally, as one measure of reliability, a coefficient alpha was calculated to estimate internal consistency. The results found the *School Practices Survey* to have reasonably good internal consistency (alpha =. 83).

Discussion and Conclusions

In a study designed to determine the extent of adoption of various educational practices, it was found that, on most dimensions of schooling, Catholic and Public elementary schools do not significantly differ. On the whole, the two types of schools seem to be more alike than different. Some differences were found in the teaching of *Instruction*, and in the *Outcomes* expected. Specifically, Catholic schools tended to rely more on methods of traditional direct instruction by the teacher, than on the type of self-directed student learning more widespread in Public schools. On the other hand, they were somewhat more progressive than their public school counterparts in adopting more of a "whole child" approach to child dvelopment. Of course these results must be interpreted with some caution, considering the limitations inherent in such survey research.

First, it should be kept in mind that these data represent *opinions* about the practices extant in the schools, and do not necessarily reflect the *actual* practices. On the other hand, a certain validity may be given to those opinions since they are those of the principal, an educational leader who is increasingly being seen as having a key role in determining the quality and type of education being delivered in today's schools.

Second, a well-known response tendency towards the mean is often found in survey research, and most probably had some effect on these data. Educators, like most people, tend not to wish to be seen as extreme in the views or their behavior, for the most part preferring the middle ground.

A third, and related factor, inherent in the solicitation of opinions, is the possibility of social desirability influencing the data. That influence may be inferred by some of the comments volunteered by the participants of this study. While the words "traditional" and "progressive" were purposely avoided in the cover letter, and on the survey form, nevertheless some respondents discerned the underlying dimensional framework. It may be that in some cases, participants felt the word "progressive" had a more positive connotation; some seemed to be rather apologetic for subscribing to a more traditional approach to education. Of the six respondents who chose to comment on the survey, two suggested related research questions, while the other four expressed sentiments showing a concern that their school may not be progressive enough:

#28 " We have been working for 3 years on developmentally appropriate practices. We are in the process of becoming child-centered."

#70 "The community in which our school is located is quite traditional and conservative. Therefore, our efforts to change the paradigm is very slow and must be supported by adequate parent input and communication. Before a change can be implemented, parents must be informed well in advance and given the opportunity to ask questions."

#106 " I am a new principal of my school....it is my sense that I am dealing with a rather traditional situation. My goal is to move to the other end of the continuum."

#130 "By completing this form I realized after looking over my answers, that this school is still in the traditional style of teaching. We are slowly trying to modernize our style."

Within the context of school reform, issues of school choice have become widely and publicly debated. A better understanding of the practices reported to be in place in today's schools will help to inform that debate, and focus the discussion of choice by providing a framework with clear alternatives. It is hoped that his study will contribute towards that end.

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Table 2
A Comparison of Public and Catholic Schools on the *School Practices Survey*

Survey Item	n	Mean	SD
INSTRUCTION			
All Schools	115	3.20	.92
Public Schools	56	3.42	.91
Catholic Schools	59	3.00	.89
READING			
All Schools	115	2.73	.88
Public Schools	56	2.89	.80
Catholic Schools	59	2.57	.9
MATHEMATICS			
All Schools	115	3.20	.85
Public Schools	56	3.26	.86
Catholic Schools	59	3.13	.83
SOCIAL STUDIES			
All Schools	115	3.07	.77
Public Schools	56	2.94	.69
Catholic Schools	59	3.02	.82
CURRICULUM			
All Schools	115	3.06	1.03
Public Schools	56	2.91	.92
Catholic Schools	59	3.22	1.11
OUTCOMES			
All Schools	115	3.18	1.07
Public Schools	56	2.96	1.04
Catholic Schools	59	3.38	1.06
ASSESSMENT			
All Schools	115	2.70	1.00
Public Schools	56	2.80	.99
Catholic Schools	59	2.61	1.01
GRADES			
All Schools	115	2.63	1.01
Public Schools	56	2.58	.96
Catholic Schools	59	2.67	1.05
STANDARDS			
All Schools	115	3.33	1.09
Public Schools	56	3.22	1.07
Catholic Schools	59	3.42	1.11
TEACHER'S ROLE			
All Schools	115	3.00	.95
Public Schools	56	3.00	.97
Catholic Schools	59	3.01	.95
TOTAL SCORE			
All Schools	115	3.01	.61
Public Schools	56	3.00	.36
Catholic Schools	59	3.02	.39

Table 3
Analysis of Variance for Repeated Measures for Practice and Practice x Type Interaction

Source	SS	df	MS	F
Practice	60.21	9	6.69	11.10*
Practice x Type	20.73	9	.30	3.82*
Error	612.59	1017	.60	

*$p<.001$

School Practices Study -Benchmark Schools

The following Schools have been selected from the Schools Practices Study because they are reasonably consistent in the practices they report as subscribing to; they thus may serve as Benchmark Schools for the purposes of this project. The School Practices Survey (SPS) scores reported here are Total scores which may be used to place the school on the traditional/progressive continuum. Total scores range from 10 (most traditional) to 50 (most progressive), with the midpoint at 30.

The More Progressive Schools

Falk School (SPS score: **43**) is a University Laboratory School with about 300 students in grades K through 8. It draws primarily from an urban population; 28% of the students are non-white. The families of children who attend Falk School are largely middle-class and upper middle class, although there are some low-income students who attend on student aid. **The School's Philosophy**: Falk School sees itself as a warm, nurturing, supportive environment where a balance of academic concerns and social growth are predominant features. **Goals for Students**: To become a learner; to learn to learn; to become an internalized, competent person, one who knows how to work with groups of people as well as individually. To become someone who's self-challenging.

Wilson Elementary School (SPS score: **44**) is a suburban public school with 600 students drawing from a middle class, mostly White population. **The School's Philosophy**: to meet the needs of our children through an integration of disciplines, problem solving and open-ended questions used to diagnose where the children are, and where they are going. **Goals for Students:** To gain a basic level substantial enough to get to the next level, not only academically, but socially, emotionally, physically, and psychologically, so they'll be prepared to deal with problems in the world they'll have to face

Fort Pitt Elementary School (SPS score: **40**) is an urban public school in a major city with about 500 students, about 95% of whom are African-American. Classes range from Pre-school to 5th grade. **The School's Philosophy:** All children can, will, and do learn in an environment designed to address the needs, interests, and abilities of the total child. Unique features include developmentally appropriate practices that foster child choice and reflection, and an integrated curriculum themes with portfolio assessment. **Goals for Students:** a good education.

The More Traditional Schools

Aquinas Academy (SPS score: **17**) is an independent, private school in the Catholic tradition with 80 students in grades 2-11. It draws primarily from a suburban population. **The School's Philosophy:** The school is dedicated to academic excellence and the development of high moral standards in its students. **Goals for Students:** To see they receive a demanding, classical curriculum in the context of solid Christian teaching so that students develop the intellectual tools, and habits of good scholarship, necessary for higher education, and a productive life.

St. Basil School (SPS score: **16**) is an urban Catholic School with predominantly White students in grades Pre K - 8. The families from which it draws are largely middle class and low middle class. **The School's Philosophy** is to concentrate on each individual child. **Goals for students:** Stability; academic values; and the ability to know what they believe in, and not to waver in those beliefs when they face the problems life has to offer.

Bradford Academy (SPS Score: **12**) is a public charter school for grades K-5, which draws students from a number of suburban school districts. **The School's Philosophy**: The school wishes to deliver an academically rigorous, motivating and inspiring education that places the cultivation of value at the core of the educational enterprise. **Goals for Students:** The twin and intertwining goals are academic achievement and good public character.

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